

Do Social Workers in a Child Protection Agency

Need a Stress De-briefing Program?

Dannyell Nolan

Spalding University

Do Social Workers in a Child Protection Agency Need a Stress De-briefing Program?

Burn out has been described in many different ways in the literature. Many are in agreement that it is an “exhaustion of a practitioner’s mental and physical resources attributed to his or her prolonged and unsuccessful striving toward unrealistic expectations” (Azar, 2000, p. 645). The problem with being labeled as having burn out is that the definition is unclear and it does not seem to cover many of the people in the social work field. Social workers who have burn out range from veteran workers who have been dealing with issues for a long time to first time new workers who seem overwhelmed with all of the factors that go with the job. The term overwhelmed differs in the phenomenon of burn out as it is defined in the Merriam-Webster Dictionary as “to cover over completely, submerge” (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/>). Research does indicate that younger social workers who are inexperienced are less likely to stay on the job than those older more experienced workers (Acker, 1999).

Burn out has an impact on not only the social worker, the agency and the clients but also the family of the social worker (Chess, 1986). There appears to be many consequences of burn out in the social work field. Social workers report that they have symptoms of depression and anxiety, they tend to become ill in times of stress and they suffer from exhaustion. They report that they are happy when the day comes to a close and feelings of disillusionment with the field of social work. They also report more severe symptoms such as becoming angry with clients and coworkers to increased alcohol and drug use (Lewandowski, 2003). Because of these symptoms the research question, Do social workers in a child protection agency need a stress de-briefing program, is being posed.

Review of the Literature

There appears to be many articles that address the phenomenon of burn out in many different areas of professions. Many of the articles talk about the effects of burn out but it doesn't appear that there is any emphasis on decreasing social worker burn out.

H.J. Freudenberger is credited as the father of the "burn out" concept. He changed the meaning of the word to reflect the psychological state of the people that worked in the alternative health care agencies in the 1970's. The previous meaning of burn out in the 1960's was used to reflect chronic drug abuse. There are two main tests given to social workers to determine their burn out level. They include the Maslach Burnout Inventory and the Pines Tedium Scale. The Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) is divided into three subscales: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and personal accomplishment. It allows the answers to be written in statement or feeling form and scores each subscale separately. The Pines Tedium Scale measures 21 different experiences. This scale looks at the physical, emotional and mental exhaustion. The answers then give the mean score of burn out for all items (Soderfeldt, 1995).

Previous experiments done on the issue of burn out have revealed that there are three main reasons why social workers feel frustrated. One reason is the labor process, which included case assignments, having the support of their agency, and having enough time to spend with clients. The second reason falls under the private trouble/public issues that social workers face and it includes isolation, powerlessness, and having enough energy for clients and their agency. The third reason falls under bureaucratic paperwork and rules and this includes such factors as feeling burdened by paperwork and feeling like they are constricted by agency rules (Lewandowski, 2003).

It seems that the majority of research shows that external or environmental factors can influence burn out. According to some research, personality traits can signify whether a person is headed towards having burn out. The personality traits that have been attributed to burn out seem to be “neuroticism, extraversion, external locus of control, job distance inability or not being able to leave work at work, existential frustration and ability to love” (Buhler & Land, 2003, pg. 9). Another part of the research has revealed that there is no clear definition of what burn out truly is. Much of the research said it was mental and physical exhaustion while other research focuses on depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment. Depersonalization is the response by the workers wherein they develop negative feelings about their clients. Reduced personal accomplishment refers to the workers feeling dissatisfied with the accomplishments that they have achieved at work (Chenoweth, et al., 2002).

It appears that a lot of research has been trying to look at the person and their environment instead of the work the practitioners do on a day-to-day basis. The workers are usually under pressure to perform in a crisis situation, and by doing so on a day-to-day basis, they are unable to relieve their own stress. Another problem with the research being done is that you will not find a lot of research directly related to the social work field itself; you will find research on mental health professions and other helping professions (Chenoweth, et al., 2002, p. 255-256).

There appears to be a lot of research on the environment and the personality traits related to the burn out theory. Because there does not appear to be any research on what practitioners really need as far as stress de-briefing, the following research question is being posed: Do social workers in a child protection agency need a stress de-briefing program?

Methodology

The qualitative design will consist of descriptive research with the use of approximately forty mailed questionnaires or surveys. The surveys will consist of questions that focus on social workers in the child protection agency in order to further investigate the phenomenon of burn out in the social work field. The use of surveys appeared to be the easiest way to determine the factors of burn out and to be able to contact all the child protective investigative workers in Jefferson County.

The list of subjects will be obtained through the Human Resource Department in Jefferson County. Once this list is obtained the surveys with the informed consent clause will be put in mailboxes for the supervisors to give to the workers. Once the workers finish the surveys they can return the surveys back to the investigator through inner-office mail. The data collected will be kept behind two locked doors to ensure that no one has access to the data collected except for the investigator. This means of research should not raise any ethical concerns due to the fact that no harm will come to the participants. The survey will not have a line for the participants to put their name or any identifying information on the survey, and consent will be assumed if they return the survey. This will allow for total anonymity and protect workers from repercussions should they indicate burn out.

Subjects

The subjects participating in this study will be child protective workers in the investigation unit in Jefferson County that work for the Cabinet for Health and Family Services. They will range from new employees to veteran employees and will consist of both men and women. The age range of the participants and the number of years employed by the Cabinet for

Health and Family Services are unknown at this point, but this question will be incorporated into the survey. The time in which the data will be collected will be from January to April 2005.

Sampling Design

Availability sampling will be the sample design used in my survey. This type of sample has been chosen due to the fact that the investigative unit will be surveyed. This survey will look at the burn in the workers at this particular time but at other times the data could be different due to stress levels being different, case load and types of cases being different. This type of sample allows use of the workers that are available on this date and to be able to measure the feelings of burn out that they are experiencing.

Instrumentation

The instrument that has been chosen to determine if social workers in a child protection agency feel that they need a stress de-briefing program is a survey. This survey will be written by the investigator and will reflect some elements of the Maslach Burnout Inventory. These elements include emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and personal accomplishment. This survey will also examine the age of the participant, the gender, how long they have been employed with the agency, and how long they have been in the social work profession. The types of questions that will be asked are: degrees of stress, how the participants relieve their stress, and whether they feel that their agency should provide a stress de-briefing program. The elements of the Maslach Burnout Inventory that are included are questions regarding the extent of exhaustion, feelings and attitudes towards clients and coworkers and feelings of personal accomplishment in the profession.

Findings

The purpose of this research was to determine if social workers in a child protection agency felt they needed a stress de-briefing program. The survey asked the participants how long they had been employed as a social worker and also how long they had been employed as a social worker in the investigative unit. Participants were also asked about the support resources offered by their agency including stress management training, if they felt there was sufficient support at their workplace and if they felt they were given too much responsibility with their job. This surveyed asked participants to disclose whether they had ever been involved in a fatality of a child due to abuse or neglect and if they had ever experienced a traumatic event with a child. The qualitative of the survey asked participants to explain how they relieve their work related stress and the kinds of services that could be offered in a stress debriefing program that would be useful to them. The survey also asked participants who felt they suffer from work related stress to make suggestions on what the Cabinet could do to help them eliminate or deal with their stress.

Participant Experience and stress training

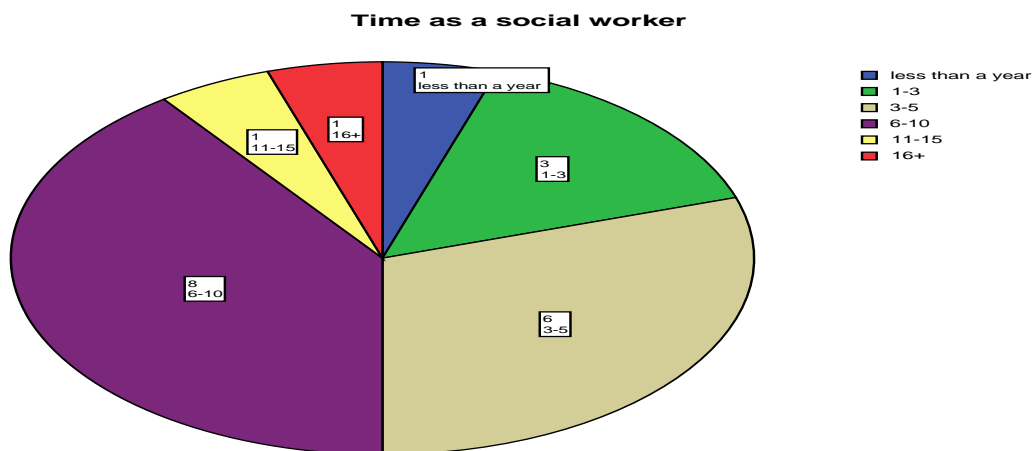


Table1

Table 1 shows that the majority of the participants have been employed as a social worker for over five years. Specifically 8 out of the 20 participants have been employed 6-10 years while only 1 of the 20 participants had been a social worker for less than a year and only 1 had been a social worker for over 16 years.

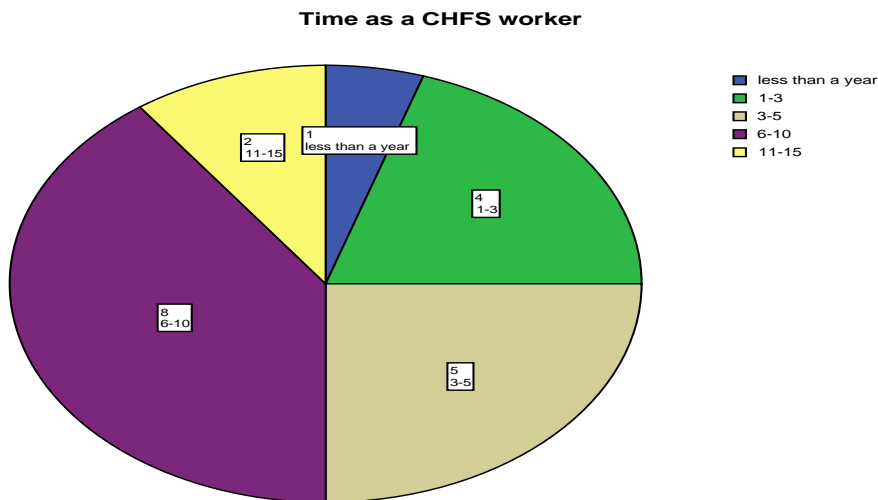


Table 2

The information in Table 2 reflects the amount of years that the social worker has been employed with CHFS. The findings are the same as in Table 1 with the exception of 2 of these participants have been employed 11-15 years and none over 15 years. The information regarding whether these employees had been given stress training showed that 85% of workers said they had not had any training regarding stress from their agency.

Worker Responsibility and agency support

Has R been given too much responsibility as a worker

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid yes	16	80.0	80.0	80.0
no	4	20.0	20.0	100.0
Total	20	100.0	100.0	

Table 3

The respondents (80%) shared that they felt they had been given too much responsibility as a worker. Some of the comments that followed in the qualitative section revealed that many respondents felt they had too many cases. They felt that new workers need to be hired to relieve some of the pressure that they are feeling due to the high case load. Many of the workers felt they did not have sufficient support at work (Table 4). One worker commented “listen when I say I’m overwhelmed.” Another said, “The people pushing the higher number (of cases) need to work the cases and feel the liability and pressure to handle the load.” Another commented, “It appears the Cabinet doesn’t care about their workers doing this stressful job.” The longest reply about this was, “It feels as though upper mgmt. doesn’t care for or appreciate employees. Mgmt. doesn’t offer means of employees voicing concerns/problems and this leads to probs. causing employee further stress. It causes me much stress to not feel heard. It stresses me that upper mgmt. has attitude “if you don’t like it quit.” This doesn’t make me feel appreciated or respected.”

Does R feel they have sufficient support at work

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid yes	5	25.0	25.0	25.0
no	15	75.0	75.0	100.0
Total	20	100.0	100.0	

Table 4

Traumatic or Child Fatality Experience

In response to whether the investigative worker had either been involved in a child fatality or a traumatic event, 90% of workers had been involved in a traumatic event while only 35% had been involved in a death. Only 42% of workers who had been involved in a fatality

said they would use a stress de-briefing program while 58% of worker who had been involved in a traumatic event would use the de-briefing program.

Relieving work-related stress

In response to how do workers relieve their work-related responses the written answers varied. A few workers responded by saying they drink or go to AA meetings. The other responses received included things such as exercising, gardening, thoughts of quitting the job, sleeping, talking to others and eating.

Offering a stress de-briefing program

When asked if workers felt they could benefit from a stress de-briefing program 65% said they felt they could benefit from a program and 60% said they would utilize a de-briefing program if it was offered by the agency. The responses varied when workers were asked what services the Cabinet could offer in the debriefing program that they felt would be useful to them. One felt a suggestion box or a relaxation group would be a benefit. Another felt that gym memberships and to be taught stress relief techniques would be helpful. A few workers just felt that a support group or forum to allow them to talk freely would be beneficial.

Suggestions to Cabinet

At the end of the survey workers were asked to offer suggestions to the Cabinet on what they felt the Cabinet could do to help eliminate or deal with the stress. Overwhelmingly, most responses said to hire new workers and lessen the caseloads on the workers that are here. A few responses stated that the child abuse hotline needed to change criteria for some of the FINSA cases to change them to resource linkages, reduce amount of paperwork that is required for each case and to lessen the demand for no overdue cases

Problems with research

The research was lost in the beginning and not turned into the University's ethics committee until late. The Cabinet for Health and Family Services IRB made a few changes to the project by had no problems approving the project. Unfortunately, the university rejected it and once changes were made it was finally approved.

Conclusion

Burn out has been shown to be a widespread problem in the helping professions. Not only does it affect one's professional life but it can affect their personal life as well. The previous experiments done on the issue of burn out addressed the three main reasons social workers feel frustrated. These three reasons included the labor process, private trouble/public issues and bureaucratic paperwork.

Discussion

While the original research question was "do social workers in a child protection agency need a stress debriefing program" the conclusion from the data reveals that 60% of the workers felt that they would utilize a stress debriefing program were it offered while 35% said they would not use the service. The data also revealed that 65% felt they could benefit from a program and 35% felt they wouldn't benefit.

The literature review said that social workers become angrier at clients and their families because of burnout and the research revealed that 40% of workers said they have conflicts with their spouse or significant other and 45% said they have conflicts with colleagues due to burnout. The literature review also stated that social workers have increased alcohol use. The responses to the survey revealed that out of the twenty responses given four of the workers said they drink excessively to relieve stress and one stated they attend AA meetings to relieve stress. The

finding do support the literature review in that most of the workers feel powerless, feel they do not have enough support from their agency, too many case assignments and too much paperwork.

Based on all of the answers given in this research project it would appear that the investigative workers in the investigative unit are burned out. The responses given show that the workers feel that they are fighting a losing battle within their own agency. The responses show that workers feel they need more agency support and less cases and that they do not have a voice within their agency. In conclusion, this research has shown that yes social workers in a child protection agency need a stress debriefing program.

Implications for practice

This research shows that the social workers are burned out and do need a stress debriefing program. Since there has not been specific research done on social worker stress this is a area that needs more research. These workers are dealing with children's lives on a daily basis and if they are under such extreme stress that they are drinking excessively or under such a high volume of cases then a child's life could be at stake. These finding would be beneficial to the agency administration and how they run their agency. The administration needs to look at why their employees feel as if they don't have a voice, why they feel they don't have support and why they feel too much responsibility in their job. Also, why are their employees not trained in stress management when they are responsible for dealing with it on a day to day basis?

The agency has a responsibility not only to the clients they serve but to the employees who are responsible for serving those clients. This agency needs to offer their employees more than what they have in the past. Obviously, by the research what they have been practicing is no

longer working. Once the employees are happy the clients and families will benefit and that is only going to be accomplished by this Cabinet making changes.

Further research

After completing this research it is evident that further research is needed. There are many areas of burn out that should be looked into further. Although there have been many studies done on burn out there are very few that looks at social work in particular. In doing this research there are many unanswered questions that are left remaining. In particular, what is the impact that burn out is having on the workers health and their family life. Probably most importantly what is the impact on the clients they serve? Also, an important topic to research would be does the agency respond to burn out and do they have measures already in place to assist their employees.

References

- Acker, G.M. (1999). The impact of clients' mental illness on social workers' job satisfaction and Burnout. *Health & Social Work, 24*, 112-120. Retrieved October 16, 2004, from the Ebscohost database.
- Azar, S.T. (2000). Preventing burnout in professionals and paraprofessionals who work with child abuse and neglect cases: A cognitive behavioral approach to supervision. *Psychotherapy in Practice, 56*, 643-663. Retrieved October 16, 2004, from the Ebscohost database.
- Buhler, K.E. & Land, T. (2003). Burnout and personality in intensive care: An empirical study. *Hospital Topics: Research and Perspectives on Healthcare, 81* (4), 5-12. Retrieved October 16, 2004 from the Social Sciences database.
- Chenoweth, L., King, R., & Lloyd, C. (2002). Social work, stress and burnout: A review. *Journal of Mental Health, 11*, 255-265. Retrieved October 16, 2004, from the Social Sciences database.
- Chess, W., Jayaratne, S., & Kunkel, D., (1986). Burnout: Its impact on child welfare workers and their spouses. *Social Work, January-February*, 53-58. Retrieved October 16, 2004 from the Social Sciences database.
- Lewandowski, C.A., (2003). Organizational factors contributing to worker frustration: The precursor to burnout. *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare, 4*, 175-185. Retrieved October 16, 2004, from the Social Sciences database.
- Soderfeldt, M., & Soderfeldt, B., (2003). Burnout in social work. *Social Work, 40*, 638-647. Retrieved October 16, 2004, from the Ebscohost database.

**DO SOCIAL WORKERS
IN A CHILD
PROTECTION
AGENCY FEEL THEY
NEED A STRESS DE-
BRIEFING PROGRAM?**

Affects of Burn out

- Social workers report that they have symptoms of depression and anxiety, they tend to become ill in times of stress and they suffer from exhaustion
- They report that they are happy when the day comes to a close and feelings of disillusionment with the field of social work.
- They also report more severe symptoms such as becoming angry with clients and coworkers to increased alcohol and drug use (Lewandowski, 2003)

Review of Literature

- Previous experiments done on the issue of burn out have revealed that there are three main reasons why social workers feel frustrated.
 - **Labor Process** -which included case assignments, having the support of their agency, and having enough time to spend with clients.
 - **Private trouble/public issues**-that social workers face and it includes isolation, powerlessness, and having enough energy for clients and their agency
 - **Bureaucratic paperwork and rules**- this includes such factors as feeling burdened by paperwork and feeling like they are constricted by agency rules (Lewandowski, 2003).

Review of Literature cont.

- **definition is unclear** and it does not seem to cover many of the people in the social work field
- Many are in agreement that it is an “exhaustion of a practitioner’s mental and physical resources attributed to his or her prolonged and unsuccessful striving toward unrealistic expectations” (Azar, 2000, p. 645).
- Research does indicate that younger social workers who are inexperienced are less likely to stay on the job than those older more experienced workers (Acker, 1999).

Methodology

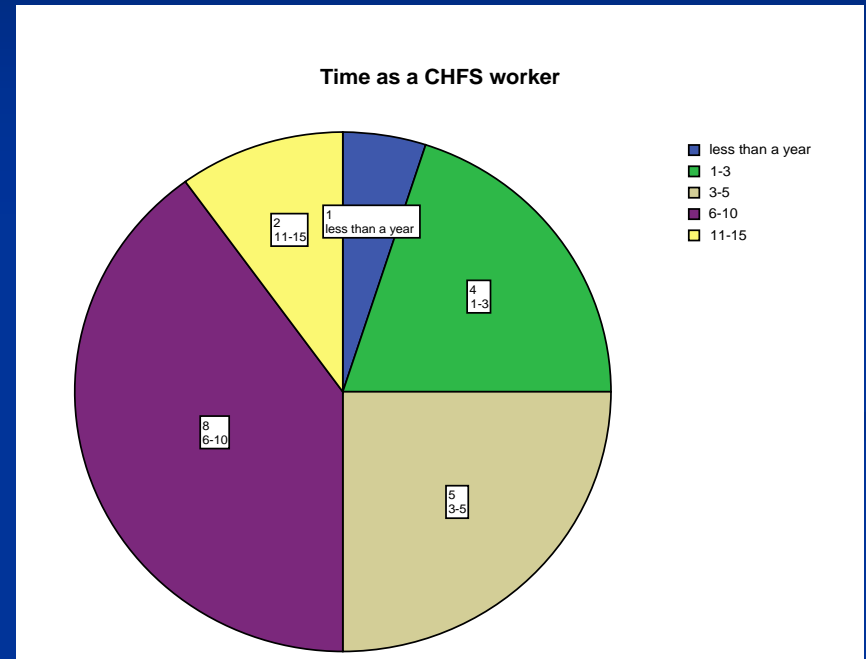
- qualitative **design** will consist of descriptive research with the use of questionnaires or surveys
- **subjects** will be child protective workers in the investigation unit in Jefferson County that work for the Cabinet for Health and Family Services

Methodology cont.

- **Instrument** that has been chosen is a survey approximately 40 surveys will be sent to the entire investigative unit in Jefferson County
- **Availability sampling**- the survey will look at the burn in the workers at this particular time but at other times the data could be different due to stress levels being different, case load and types of cases being different.

Findings

- 20 responses
- 85% of workers said they had not had any training regarding stress
- 80% felt they had been given too much responsibility as a worker



Quotes from workers

- “Listen when I say I’m overwhelmed.”
- “The people pushing the higher number (of cases) need to work the cases and feel the liability and pressure to handle the load.”
- “It appears the Cabinet doesn’t care about their workers doing this stressful job.”
- “It feels as though upper mgmt. doesn’t care for or appreciate employees. Mgmt. doesn’t offer means of employees voicing concerns/problems and this leads to probs. causing employee further stress. It causes me much stress to not feel heard. It stresses me that upper mgmt. has attitude “if you don’t like it quit.” This doesn’t make me feel appreciated or respected.”

Findings

- 90% of workers had been involved in a traumatic event and 35% had been involved in a death
- 42% of workers who had been involved in a fatality said they would use a stress de-briefing program
- 58% of worker who had been involved in a traumatic event would use the de-briefing program.

Findings

- **Relieving work-related stress**
 - they drink or go to AA meetings
 - exercising
 - gardening
 - thoughts of quitting the job
 - sleeping
 - talking to others
 - eating

Conclusion

- Offering a stress de-briefing program
 - 65% said they felt they could benefit from a program
 - 60% said they would utilize a de-briefing program if it was offered by the agency

Conclusion

■ PROBLEMS OF RESEARCH

- lost in the beginning
- turned into the University's ethics committee late
- university rejected project

■ IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

- Once the employees are happy the clients and families will benefit

■ FURTHER RESEARCH

- further research is needed
- what is the impact that burn out is having on the workers health and their family life
- what is the impact on the clients they serve
- does the agency respond to burn out and do they have measures already in place to assist their employees.